

The Rebuilding of Szeged in Photographs

The present layout of the city of Szeged is not the result of evolution over time, but that of grandiose engineering work. The cityscape now “does not even remotely resemble the structure of Szeged in medieval times or, with the exception of the town centre, anything that had existed before the Great Flood. The main aim of the plans was to guarantee reliable flood protection in the future“, wrote Béla Borvendég, one-time Chief Architect of Szeged.¹

The population of Szeged numbered over 70 thousand before the Great Flood, one third of whom lived in the widely-spread outskirts, similarly to other towns on the Great Plain. The outskirts were organised into 16 administrative districts, two of which, Alsótanya [Lower settlements] and Felsőtanya [Upper settlements], later grew into distinct village-like centres.

At daybreak on the 12th of March 1879, the river Tisza burst its banks and flooded the town, causing total devastation. Of some six thousand houses, barely 330 were left standing. Five days after the disaster, Emperor Franz Joseph arrived in Szeged, accompanied by Prime Minister Kálmán Tisza. Alighting from the train, he was confronted with the sight of the houses of Alsóváros [Lower Town] standing in water up to their roofs. The visitors were carried by boats around the ruined town to inspect the damage. That was when the promise “Szeged is going to be more beautiful than it has ever been“ was announced by the Emperor.²

Mistakes made during the regulation work along the river Tisza were held responsible for the disaster, therefore the town justifiably expected the government to provide every possible help in these desperate times.

In May, the government passed two laws to aid the rebuilding of Szeged: the first one allowed the expropriation of property and the second stated the appointment of a Royal Commissioner with virtually unlimited powers to organise and supervise the reconstruction work. On 4th July, Lajos Tisza (1832–1898), one-time Minister of Employment and Transport, was officially appointed Royal Commissioner for the duration of one year.

1 Borvendég, Béla: Mit is ízen Lechner Lajos? [What is the message of Lajos Lechner?] In: Lechner és Szeged. Emlékkülés Szeged Nagyárvíz utáni újjáépítője tiszteletére [Lechner and Szeged. Memorial conference in honour of the town's post-flood Chief Architect]. Szeged: Csongrád Megyei Urbanisztikai Egyesület 1997, p. 61–67.

2 Kulinyi Zsigmond: Szeged új kora. A város újabb története (1879–1899) és leírása [A New Age of Szeged. The latest History and the Description of the City (1879–1899)]. Szeged: Szeged szab. kir. város közönsége 1901, p. 21.



Széchenyi Square and the Town Hall after the Great Flood, March, 1879



The eastern part of Széchenyi Square with the tents of survivors built at the site of the castle, 1879



Lower Town from the railway embankment, 1879



Palánk under water, 1879 (The Votive Church was built on this site in 1930)

This event caused a lot of resentment, since Lajos Tisza was the Prime Minister's brother. The Commissioner was helped by a council of twelve members, of whom nine were appointed by the Prime Minister, and three were delegated by the Szeged Town Council. The expert planners were selected from various government departments. Technical and engineering work was led by Lajos Lechner (1833–1897), who had 3 years earlier won an international contract bid for town planning work in the capital, and was the advocate of the most up-to-date principles of town planning of his time.³

Lajos Tisza arrived in Szeged on 11th June with the 12-member council and a large team of experts. The relationship between the town's officials and the commissioner was of mutual distrust. The commissioner's authority extended to every aspect of the post-flood reconstruction, e.g. estimating loss and damage, distributing aid, supervising reconstruction plans and building regulations, ordering the expropriation of property, managing the budget, issuing building permits, as well as issues concerning public health, public safety and policing, and he even had authority over the town council.

Large parts of the town were still under water. The basic concept of the reconstruction had been decided by a committee of experts. One of the cornerstones of the plan was the building of a flood barrier encircling the town, since the water burst its banks downstream and flooded the town from outside. It was decided to raise the ground level of the low-lying town, separating the inner and outer districts by a circular road; to build a permanent road bridge; to integrate Újszeged [New Szeged] on the left bank of the river into Szeged proper (the opposite bank of the Tisza had belonged to Torontál County) and, last but not least, to provide the financial resources for the reconstruction work.

Lajos Lechner and his technical team finalised the plans by the beginning of September. He carefully considered every suggestion. The town's new layout was based not on one, but two circular roads, dividing the city into three construction zones. The first was bordered by the inner circular road and the river Tisza: in this zone only brick-built, two-storey houses were permitted. Public buildings were allowed to be three storeys high. The second zone was situated between the two circular roads. In the second and third zones, the local inhabitants' customs and financial means were taken into consideration when designing different types of residential homes for them. By that time, the pumping stations had cleared the floodwater from the town, damage assessment was continuing and the construction of the new flood barrier and raising the ground level had started. Ideally, the ground level of the entire area within the flood barrier should have been raised above the peak of the flood, but that proved unworkable. Instead, the ground near

3 Cf. Nagy, Zoltán / Vágás, István: Szeged újjáépítése, a modern városkép kialakulása, az urbanizációs fejlődés [The Reconstruction of Szeged, the Development of a Modern Townscape, Urban Development]. In: Gaál, Endre (ed.): Szeged története [The History of Szeged]. vol. 3/1. Szeged: Somogyi Könyvtár 1991, p. 153–208, 162ff.

the river was raised highest, decreasing outwards: the downtown area, the circular roads and the inner sections of the avenues enjoyed priority. Private landowners were responsible for their own property. In some of these areas, the ground is still at pre-flood level.

Lechner's plans emphasized that the new circular road should also play a role in the flood protection of the town besides conveying traffic. The 30-metre wide inner circular road was built to run 8.2 metres above the 0 cm water level of the river, while the 38-metre wide outer circular road, running parallel to the inner circular 400 metres further out, was built 7 metres above the 0 cm water mark. In case of an approaching flood, traffic could quickly escape via the upward sloping avenues joining the inner circular road, towards the safety of the city centre built on higher ground. In his book, documenting the reconstruction of Szeged, Lajos Lechner explained at length the importance of raising the ground level of the city.⁴ Taking flood protection into consideration, building regulations prohibited drainpipes from running underneath the circular roads. Four reservoirs were built and the water drained into the river Tisza via three separate channels.

The costs of the pumping, building the flood barrier and the embankment and the construction of the road bridge were borne by the State and the rest of the rebuilding work was financed by loans. An 1880 law set the amount of loan available for the town's reconstruction at 15 million Forints. 5 million of this was provided for public buildings and 10 million for private property, repayable within 10 years at an interest rate of 6%. Public buildings were designed by the architects of the technical section of the Royal Commission, including architects from Budapest and abroad, mainly Vienna.

The Royal Commission, led by Lajos Tisza, remained in operation until December 1883, after its mandate had been extended several times. Lajos Lechner summed up its achievements with satisfaction. Over a mere four years of reconstruction work, 26 three-storey, 211 two-storey and 1324 single-storey town houses, 264 detached houses with gardens, 514 workshops, stables and farm buildings and 80 storehouses were built on the ruins left after the devastation.⁵

In October 1883, a three-day-long festival was held in the presence of Emperor Franz Joseph, to celebrate the successful completion of the rebuilding of the town. The *Kaiser* personally inaugurated some of the new public buildings, for example the town's theatre.

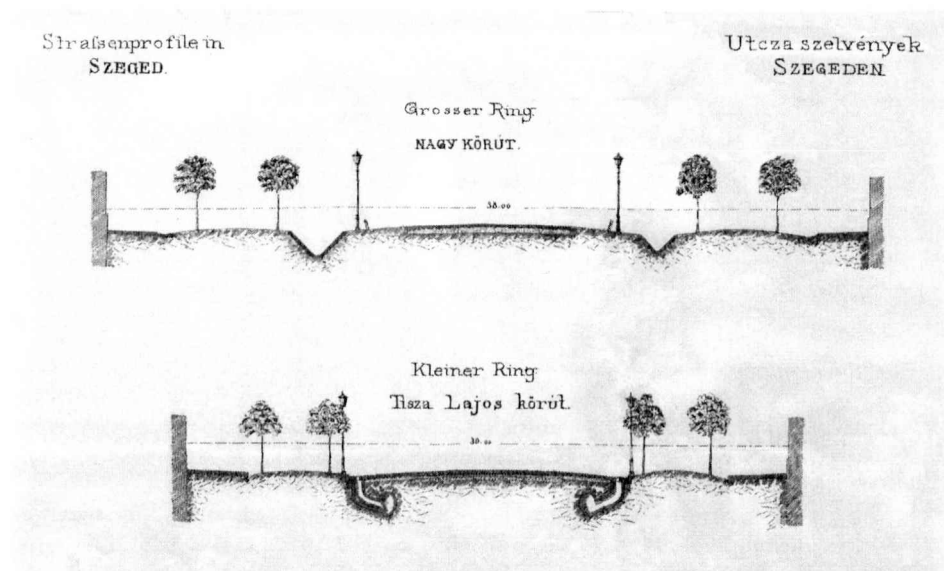
As the new cityscape was unfolding, Lajos Tisza's leadership and organising abilities were gradually acknowledged. The inner circular road was named after him in 1880; he was elected Member of Parliament in 1884 and in 1904, after his death, his statue was the first to be erected on Széchenyi Square, the city's central public square. Lajos Lechner, the chief town planner, was given the freeman of Szeged.

4 Lechner Lajos: Szeged újja építése. [The Reconstruction of Szeged]. Szeged: Csongrád Megyei urbanisztikai Egyesület 2002, p. 16-27 (Facsimile of the Original Edition of Budapest 1891).

5 Nagy / Vágás 1991, p. 180.



Map of Szeged, June 1879



From Lechner's plans, 1879



Riverbank with remains of the castle, 1883 (The new permanent Theatre and the bridge are almost ready. The special wooden boats transported corn, upriver horses pulled.)



Dugonics Square and the new circular road, 1885

The construction of the network of circular roads and straight avenues created a new map of Szeged and a permanent road bridge was also built. Its plans were drawn up by railway engineer János Fekete and executed by the French Gustave Eiffel Company. (Sadly, this bridge was blown up in 1944 by the withdrawing German troops). The medieval castle was demolished and new streets opened in its place, lined by three-storey residential buildings in eclectic style. New barracks were built in the city for the troops that had been quartered in the castle before. The castle area (Palánk) became the most valuable construction site; the theatre was built here on a plot that later proved to be rather small. The planners of the theatre, financed by the town, were two architects from Vienna, Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer, who were also the designers of the new apartment house on Klauzál Square, owned by furniture maker industrialist Lőrinc Lengyel.

The centre of the city shifted from the old Palánk district to Széchenyi Square. The Town Hall that had stood there was pulled down and a taller one was built in its place in Baroque style, with a higher tower, which dominated the skyline of the square. The new Town Hall was designed by Ödön Lechner and Gyula Pártos. On the western side of the square, opposite the Town Hall, on the site of the old castle,

public buildings and offices such as the County Court and the Central Post Office, were erected.

The reconstruction process continued, but slowed down considerably during the second half of the 1880s. One of the largest public projects of that period was the building of the Piarist Grammar School and Monastery on the then still vacant, huge Gizella Square (today Arad Martyrs' Square). Its Eclectic style is reminiscent of the palaces of the Italian Renaissance. Today it houses the university's Faculty of Mathematics (Bolyai Institute). The enthusiasm for building was boosted again in the 1890s, partly due to the approaching Millennium celebrations (the anniversary of the Hungarian Conquest in 896). The new Museum and Library near the bridge, built in Greek Classical style, was added to the row of palaces along the river Tisza. Few towns in the country could boast such grandiose and decorative cultural institutions. The thermal baths on Tisza Lajos Circular Road were also completed by the Millennium.

After the post-flood reconstruction, several government offices were relocated to Szeged, including the administration of the Hungarian State Railways, whose richly decorated headquarter building is also situated on the inner circular road. The city's population increased with the arrival of growing numbers of officials as well as workers employed in the building industry and related trades. According to statistics, the prospect of finding well-paid jobs attracted over four thousand newcomers to the city, but better than that, the birth rate in Szeged was twice that number. According to the 1890 census, the population reached 85 thousand, an increase by 12 thousand since the Great Flood. This dynamic growth continued later and, by the turn of the century, the population of Szeged grew to 100 thousand.⁶

By the end of the 19th century, further educational and other public buildings were constructed within the inner circular road, and by the outbreak of the First World War, derelict sites were gradually built up. Some remarkable buildings were created in Art Nouveau style, which was becoming popular around the turn of the century.

Szeged was an important junction in the railway network with its two stations, situated far from each other. The Austrian State Railways' (*Staatseisenbahn Gesellschaft*, STEG, operating the Vienna – Budapest – Szeged – Temesvár line) station was located in Alsóváros, while the station of the Nagyváradi – Fiume line, operated by Alföldi Vasút [Plain Railway], was located in Rókus. The embankment of the latter railway line had protected the city and resisted the water for days before the fatal failure of the barrier near Rókus Station in 1879.⁷ The STEG lines were taken over by the Hungarian State Railways (MÁV) in 1891; the other company had been taken over earlier. Several ad-

6 Cf. Kováts, Zoltán: A népességnövekedés [Growth of the population]. In: Gaál 1991, p. 489–523.

7 Cf. Lugosi, József: A közlekedés és a szállítás [Traffic and Transport]. In: Gaál 1991, p. 337–375, 346ff.

ministration offices of MÁV were relocated to Szeged; one of them, built in 1912, today houses the university's Faculty of Arts.

A horse tramway to connect the two railway stations and provide public transport through the town centre had been planned even before the flood, but it was only executed in 1884, and within a decade, it already became obsolete. Electric tram transport started in 1908 with the help of an Austrian-Belgian investment, not on one, but on four lines, and in 1909, the two banks of the river were also linked by a tram line.

Large construction projects came to a standstill with the outbreak of WWI, and were only completed in 1930; notably the building of the Votive Church and Dóm Square. The elected representatives of the town council made a solemn pledge in 1880, one year after the Great Flood, to build a monumental church to commemorate the rebuilding of the city after the devastation. The Votive Church had a vicissitudinous start. The building was being built on the site of the old St. Demetrius church when in 1914, the First World War broke out, and construction work stopped. The solemn pledge made in 1880 could only be honoured half a century later. The Votive Church is surrounded on three sides by arcaded buildings, designed by Béla Rerrich, for the use of the Church and the university. The Bishop's Palace, relocated from Temesvár to Szeged, also received a worthy home here. Many consider Dóm Square the St. Mark's Square of Szeged, the greatest achievement of Hungarian architecture between the two world wars. The middle building, the Medical School, was the workplace of Nobel laureate Albert Szent-Györgyi. Under the arches, statues of the nation's greats are displayed.

After the Trianon Peace Treaty, which formally ended WWI, the University of Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) was relocated to Szeged in 1921. Szeged's ambition to become a university town was fulfilled. Housing the institutions and faculties of the University presented a huge challenge to the city. At the same time, however, with the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, many office buildings and other facilities became vacant, ideal for the purposes of the university. This explains why the buildings of the university are scattered over the city. New construction work started along the near-complete Votive church by the demolition of Palánk district. Today, the university's teaching hospitals stand on the riverbank, on the site of the medieval town's picturesque little houses.

After the Trianon Peace Treaty, Szeged became a border town. The town's industry, which was based on the processing of agricultural produce, struggled because the supply lines of raw materials had been cut, and so were the traditional trade routes towards the south, causing the loss of markets. Instead of being an important railway junction, Szeged became a terminal station. The population of the city reached 120 thousand by 1920, but during the following decade, the dynamic growth gradually slowed down, and eventually stopped.

The writer Zsigmond Móricz tells the story of his visit to a slipper maker's workshop he came upon near the railway station in 1913. The carmine coloured strings of paprika, hanging under the eaves of almost every house, left to dry according to the tradition of paprika growers, were conspicuous even at a distance, from the windows of the approaching train. "Endlessly long, arrow-straight streets of the Lower Town. Grassy trenches along both sides, with geese squawking in them and a dead cat waiting for the day of the resurrection." Travellers passed through these provincial outskirts to arrive in "the elegant, genteel Szeged with its riverbank, palaces, avenues and beautiful statues". Girls from the Lower Town are "not provincially joyful, but urbanised and keep their distance, ambling along the cold winter's snowless streets in their rose-decorated slippers"⁸.

"Szeged is not a town of industry and trade, but of offices and the petty bourgeois", wrote Sándor Tonelli, Chief Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Szeged, in 1934.⁹ It is evident from the townscape, too: there are few factory chimneys, warehouses and private palaces on the skyline, but there are many public buildings and residential buildings that meet the needs of civil servants and the vast majority of homes, especially in the outskirts, are rural type detached houses rather than urban flats.

Tonelli's description of the town is supported by statistical data: 72.75% of the total number of the buildings were single-storey, 10.38% were double-storey, 2.68% were three-storey, and 0.62% were four storeys high.¹⁰ The majority of the linked, multi-storey residential buildings were erected within the inner circular road; only a few were scattered between the inner and outer circulars. Moving away from the centre, visitors found the environment increasingly rural; the streets were lined with detached houses, derelict plots of land and temporary shacks. Beyond the outer circular road, the surroundings turned definitely village-like with dirt roads and open sewers. The Lower Town's typical backward-facing houses and facades decorated with the stylised image of the radiating Sun are the result of the post-flood town reconstruction.

The distribution of various crafts throughout Szeged can be shown by projecting data from contemporary craftsmen's records onto the map of the town. During the period before the Great Flood, most independent craftsmen lived and worked in the Palánk district; which corresponds to the present town centre within the inner circular road. The second most industrialised district was the Upper Town, where mainly carters and boat-

8 Móricz, Zsigmond: A szegedi papucs [The Szeged slippers]. In: Győri, Lajos (ed.): Iparosok, mesterségek műhelyek [Craftsmen, trades and workshops]. Budapest: Múzsák Kiadó 1988, p. 167-172.

9 Tonelli, Sándor: Szeged gazdasági viszonyai [Economic conditions in Szeged]. In: Pálffy-Budinszky, Endre / Hergár, Viktor (eds.): Szeged városépítési problémái [The architectural challenges of Szeged]. Szeged: Prometheus Nyomda 1934, p. 44-55.

10 Sztankó, Dezső: Demográfiai és statisztikai viszonyok [Demographics and statistics]. In: Pálffy-Budinszky / Hergár 1934, p. 31-43.

men were located. Factories employing the largest number of workers were based in the Rókus district. These included the Hemp Weaving Company, the Tobacco Factory, the Winter Brush Factory and the Match Factory, founded in 1922. After the Great Flood, the Hemp Factory was rebuilt at its original location, right next to the new outer circular road. The factory was demolished a few years ago and today the Árkád Shopping Centre stands on its former site.

The distribution of joiners (the third most populous trade with 234 members) was quite even throughout the town; there was no significant variation among the districts, perhaps with the exception of the Lower Town, the inhabitants of which were mainly farmers.

Upholsterers' workshops were concentrated in the town centre; 80% of the 32 upholsterers worked within the inner circular road; none were based in the Lower Town and Móraváros. Móraváros was the district that was populated last, mainly by lower middle class people and factory workers from the neighbouring Rókus district.

The majority of service providers, mechanics and technicians for example, were also concentrated in the centre, but some were found in every district, even in Újszeged. A relatively new trade, they were trying to position themselves near the transport hub of the town.

Traditional furriers, a trade of the wealthy (as opposed to the larger number of boot makers, who were less well-off), were also based mainly in the town centre; however, two furrieries were found in the Lower Town, a district inhabited mainly by farmers. One furriery operated in the more industrialised Upper Town, and another two on its outskirts.

The commercial and administrative centre of the town attracted most tradesmen to settle and live, or at least maintain their workshops and stores there. The distribution of slipper makers' workshops in 1909 is the opposite of that of the crafts mentioned earlier: they were found mainly beyond the outer circular road, only very few were based in the centre. Of the 81 masters, a mere 4 were working within the inner circular road; the majority chose to live and work in the cheaper regions of the town, and instead of running a shop, they sold their wares in markets and fairs. Their workshops were evenly distributed throughout the districts.

The town's open spaces and squares served mainly as market places. The largest markets were held in Széchenyi Square, in front of the Town Hall, until the early 1900s, when the square was turned into a park and the market moved out to the inner circular road. Some of the weekly market days (Wednesdays and Saturdays) were held on the inner circular road and the vegetable market was also here. The flour, bread and dairy market was open every day on Klauzál Square. The Paprika market was situated on Valéria Square (today Bartók Béla Square). The growers who transported their goods on horse-drawn carts from settlements on the outskirts had their market on Mars Square. There was also a market place on the riverbank by the bridge. Moreover, until 1930,



Bread market on Klauzál Square, round 1910



Poultry market on the inner circular road next to the Hungarian Railways' Headquarters, round 1920



The great artesian well near the steam bath on the inner circular road, 1899

farmers were offering their produce on carts in front of the Museum and Library. The director at that time, Ferenc Móra, objected to the litter and smell caused by the market, and soon the area in front of the Museum was landscaped and turned into a park. On the other hand, traders on Tisza Lajos Circular Road, for fear of losing customers, objected to the market being evicted from the area.

The first denominational churches, the Reformed church and the Lutheran church were built on the inner circular road after the Great Flood. (Royal Commissioner Lajos Tisza, responsible for directing the reconstruction work of the town, was a Lutheran). Between the two world wars, new public buildings were erected on Tisza Lajos Circular Road: a second Reformed church, a specialised surgery and clinic and Heroes' Gate, commemorating the heroes of the First World War. Public buildings were concentrated in the square kilometre of the town centre bordered by the inner circular road, whereby a district of university and ecclesiastical buildings was formed. The public and private buildings, public squares and parks lent Szeged the ambiance of a truly great city.

Huge army barracks were built on the outer circular road, sections of which had been named after the capital cities of countries that helped with the post-flood reconstruction of the town. Soldiers from the demolished castle were quartered here. They could exercise on the adjoining marshy land (today Mars Square, farmers' market and bus station).

The prison, considered the most up-to-date at the time, was also built on this square. Its name, Csillag [Star] refers to the shape of its floor plan. Two more public buildings can be found on the outer circular road: the Orphanage and the Police Headquarters.

Road surfacing, which started in the town centre, progressed outwards at a rather slow pace, typical of the conditions throughout the country. In 1911, only 58% of the 120 km long road network had some kind of hard surface (crushed stone, asphalt, cobblestones, tarmac, wood or ceramics). The situation was better within the outer circular road with 75% of streets with a cobbled surface; outside this area, only 25% of the streets had any kind of hard surface. The large number of unpaved streets and the fact that most paved streets within the inner circular road had unpaved lanes (so-called summer lanes) running parallel to them, made street cleaning very difficult. According to a contemporary report, even the streets with a hard surface were only second and third-rate quality.¹¹ In 1932, the proportion of streets with a hard surface was 59.2%, which was good in comparison with other cities, for example another regional centre, Debrecen, where the ratio was 45.7%.¹²

During the post-flood reconstruction work, drinking water and waste water systems were not given priority. Drinking water was supplied by drilled artesian wells. The photograph taken in 1899 shows the so-called great artesian well by the inner circular road, near the steam baths. The town's first (the country's second) steel reinforced concrete water tower was built in 1904, and it is still in operation today.

To sum up, we can state that after the Great Flood, architect Lajos Lechner's grandiose plans created plenty of space for the town to recover and develop further. Lechner's town building programme included the construction of wide avenues and circular roads, wooded open spaces and squares and also well thought-out town planning regulations, for example: factories or workshops "discharging large amounts of filthy substances must not be erected in the city centre". Factories and large workshops were not be concentrated in one single district because it would have a detrimental effect on the development of the other districts of the city.¹³ The nearly 16 square km area surrounded by the flood barrier may have seemed overgenerous at the time. Despite the rapid increase of the population, there is still ample room, even a century later, for Szeged to expand, albeit nowadays outside the circular roads.

11 Cf. Fári, Irén: Köztisztasági állapotok 1912-ben Szegeden. In: Tóth, István (ed.): Múzeumi kutatások Csongrád megyében 2004 [The state of public hygiene in Szeged in 1912. Museological research in Csongrád County, 2004]. Szeged: Móra Ferenc Múzeum 2005, p. 29-38.

12 Tímár, Lajos: Vidéki városiakók. Debrecen társadalma 1920-1944 [Provincial town dwellers. The Society of Debrecen 1920-1944]. Budapest: Magvető 1993, p. 61.

13 Quoted by Takács, Máté: A Lechner-féle alapterv és hatása az 1979-ig készült fejlesztési-rendezési tervek. [Lechner's town reconstruction programme and its effects on town planning until 1979]. In: Lechner és Szeged 1997, p. 28.



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